In The Dark (The Day Appears)
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/24104473.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Category:
Other

Fandom:
The Penumbra Podcast

Relationships:
Peter Nureyev/Juno Steel, Benzaiten Steel & Juno Steel

Characters:
Juno Steel, Benzaiten Steel, Peter Nureyev, Jet Sikuliaq

Additional Tags:
Inspired by Hades and Persephone (Ancient Greek Religion & Lore), Inspired by Orpheus and Eurydice (Ancient Greek Religion & Lore), this baby can hold so many greek myth allusions, discussions of sarah steel, Bittersweet, Episode: s02e21-23 Juno Steel and the Monster's Reflection, Monster's reflection AU, i would say it is less upsetting than monster's reflection but the themes are similar, ben is dead, but slightly less dead than in canon

Language:
English

Collections:
The Penumbra Minibang 2019-2020, Favourite Penumbra Podcast Fanfics

Stats:
Published: 2020-05-10 Completed: 2020-05-14 Words: 13,931 Chapters: 6/6

In The Dark (The Day Appears)

by Illuminahsti

Summary

Twenty years ago, Sarah Steel sent Benzaiten to the underworld. It took his whole life, but finally Juno found the path to follow him. As a living human, he walked down to bring his brother back.

Instead, he found the King of the Dead, who offered him a very different bargain.

Rated for discussions of parental abuse and explicit sex scenes. Further warnings in each chapter if you need to skip parts.

Updates Daily

Notes

This is part of the Penumbra Mini Bang 2! It was such a delight to work on, and to get to work with such incredible artists.

Shout out to Mloking, Dayngel, and King Kez for their art, and to Lena and Elena for beta reading!

ONE

When Benzaiten Steel was twenty years old, he stepped on the poison asp of his mother's anger and paid the ultimate price.

Sarah Steel was a mortal woman, and her greatest sin was covetousness. She wanted and wanted and wanted as if there was something inside her that could be filled by just the right love. When mortal men could not fill the sucking blackness within her chest, she turned to prayer in desperation.

She brought two children into the world, God-touched, fatherless, and she saw this as the fulfillment of a lifelong promise. Two hearts, to love her one.

She named them after old Goddesses in acknowledgment of her great accomplishment, of singlehandedly creating lives that were entirely dependent on her kindness.

Benzaiten Steel loved his mother with optimism. Juno Steel loved his mother because he didn't know anything else.

When their love was not enough to temper her anger, when selfish poison crept back into her heart, Sarah Steel took her son out of the world. Better that he be gone than love another more than he loved her.

Juno Steel loved his brother more than he loved himself. He saw more goodness in a flash of Benzaiten's smile than he could find in the whole of his sad and aching body.

He often said that Sarah Steel split herself in two when she gave birth, and the goodness, the magnetism, the light went into Benzaiten. The rage, the bitterness, the darkness went into Juno.

Juno Steel did not see a future without Benzaiten in it, he saw only the unfairness of a beautiful life cut short, and so he walked away from Hyperion City in the hopes of walking away from his pain. He spent the next decades treading every inch of Mars, searching for answers.

As he walked, he left little bits of goodness in his wake, he gave and

gave of himself to everyone he met. He used his wits and his words to soothe hurts, he spoke eloquently in memory of his brother, who never turned to violence when a smile would ease conflict instead. And when Juno's clever tongue and quick eye was not enough, he turned to fists and gun and threw himself on the sacrificial altar of brutality to save others the pain.

He had never learned what it was to put himself first, but that was the way of heroes. He saved lives, he held hands, he avenged the weak and punished the wicked. At every turn he asked: how, where, when, do I find the missing half of my heart?

No one could answer him the way he wanted.

The dead are meant to stay dead, said the wise mothers.

Do not think you are stronger than the Gods, said the fallen warriors.

Stay with me, let me heal you, said the beautiful youths.

Juno Steel walked on, and his burden never eased.

There are gateways to the underworld on every planet; one only has to know how to find them.

Juno, for all that he was God-touched, had never learned the art of standing sideways, of looking out of the corner of his eye, of asking nicely. He knew only Sarah's method, of pounding fists against a stone wall until someone listened.

It took nearly twenty years, but someone heard his screams and opened the way. It was not an oracle who helped him; it was not anyone God-sent. It was a woman who listened, and remembered all she had been told, and knew that Juno would not rest until he had his answer. It was a friend, who saw how hard he fought, and turned her mind to helping him.

She showed him the way, gave him every piece of advice she had, recounted every scrap of story she had heard of every hero who had ever walked the dark path. The stories were the most valuable thing she could have given, because the land of the dead was a place of careful negotiations, where a step wrong could rob you of a memory, or the color of your eyes, or your heartbeat.

The living did not go into the land of the dead, and Rita knew better

than to go. Juno Steel, hero, grieving brother, did not obey the laws of the Gods. He had no reason to, when the Gods had never done a thing for him, when he had nothing he could not bear to lose.

He set off, with Rita's stories in his heart and a pack on his back, seeking an end to his quest.

Juno Steel was thirty-nine years old when he walked into the tomb alone.

TWO

Chapter Summary

Juno goes down into the Underworld, and there he finds his psychopomp

Chapter Notes

Holy hell you guys, I have the most incredible art for this chapter. Thank you so much to mloking, go find them on twitter @_SalamanderKing and shower them with praise!

https://mobile.twitter.com/_SalamanderKing

The way was dark, lit only by the torch that Juno carried. Shadows flickered on the walls and caught on carvings so thick they could have been a repeating motif, until Juno looked closer and saw that they told a story, each image unique.

Juno read the images, and he did not remember any of them.

The way went on, down and down, dark and narrow, the only sounds the quiet slap of feet against damp stone and the whistle of air through the passageway. Juno's mind raced with hope, with fear, with plans, but the way stayed dark and lonely and eventually, even his mind grew silent, and there was nothing left to feel.

Without the sun or another human to speak to, there was no way to measure time, and so there was no way for Juno to know how long he walked. He felt an aching tiredness but never did it become so acute that he slept.

His torch went out, and he carried on in the dark, one hand on the wall, but he had no chance of becoming lost; there was only one way to go, and that way was down.

The passage opened to the banks of a river that stretched in both directions until the edges vanished into fog. Everything was lit with a faint light that came from nowhere in particular. It would not have been bright had Juno not walked in darkness for a small eternity. Above Juno's head was lost to darkness, neither sky nor cavern ceiling visible through the shadows.

On the shore stood a man so tall his face was nearly lost to the fog, dressed in a long brown robe with a heavy cowl, who neither moved nor spoke as Juno stepped closer. In the water sat a worn wooden rowboat, bobbing gently up and down. Despite the current of the water, the untethered boat did not drift away. In the eerie light, the sides gleamed a metallic green, the iridescent shine of a beetle's wing.

"Are you the ferryman?" Juno asked, and his voice was rough and cracked from disuse.

The big man inclined his head in answer.

"I need to go across," Juno rasped.

"You do not belong here." His voice was deep, and flat, but not angry. There was not enough in the voice to call it angry.

Juno argued, "Sure I do, I just walked here."

"What is it you are looking for?"

Juno crossed his arms. "Right now, I want you to let me get in your little boat. I'll even row myself if I have to."

There was no way to read the man's expressions, but Juno imagined that his lips tightened. "You will not step into my boat without my permission," he said. Finally, there was some hint of emotion in his voice, a slight frustration that still drained the fight out of Juno. This man's authority was meant to be respected.

"Fine, okay," he grumbled. He stepped back, ready to walk down the riverbank until he found another way across.

The man's voice stilled him. "Tell me what you seek in the underworld," he commanded.

Juno shrugged, and spoke evasively. "Sometimes a lady needs a challenge."

"I do not have time for your sarcasm, or for your lies."

Juno cleared his throat and started again, more sincerely. "I'm looking for my brother."

"Your brother is dead." It was not a question.

"Why else would I be down here?"

“The dead are meant to stay dead,” he told Juno firmly.

“Don’t worry; I’ve heard the whole speech. I don’t need to hear it again. I brought two creds to pay my way, so unless you’re going to turn away a paying customer, I don’t want to hear your sanctimonious lecturing.” Juno pulled the two slim, pre-loaded cards out of his pocket. The wires glowed faintly orange in the dim light. He could have put both creds on a single card, but tradition called for a coin on each eye, and that had seemed a fitting compromise.

No one had coins to place anymore. They tucked cred cards into suit pockets before their loved ones were locked into their coffins and sent out into the dessert.

The ferryman watched him impassively. “You are not a customer,” he said.

“Sure I am.”

“I do not row people across because I need to make a profit. I do it because it is the necessary thing.”

“Then what are these for?” Juno snapped, waving the creds in the air.

“They are a reminder to the dead that they are cared for.”

Juno stopped, arm still raised, mouth half open.

He’d had no money to send with Ben, but he had done it anyway, because what else had there been to do? He had thought, bitterly, privately, that it was a useless thing to do, to send him off with no evidence the money meant anything, but it had comforted him to do it. He had to know, to remember, that he had done all he could.

He put the creds back in his pocket.

“Okay,” he said. “What do I need to do to get across the river?”

The ferryman was silent for so long that Juno began to think he had turned to stone. When Juno was ready to demand a response, he finally spoke. “Who gave you the money?”

“I got it myself.”

He made a small, disapproving noise. “That is not the way of things. The money is meant to be a gift, a last tether to the aboveworld.”

“Hang on,” Juno said. He dug into the pockets of his trench coat, fingers brushing against the things he always kept with him—the keys to an apartment he would probably never return to, a plasma lighter, and his flask. At the bottom was a token, a small worry stone that had been dropped into his palm for luck, once upon a time.

He wasn’t sure Rita even remembered giving it to him; her rune stone interest had been so fleeting and unfocused. But she had chosen it for him, a purple disc shot through with cloudy veins of white, the sigil for clarity engraved in a language ten thousand years dead.

He held it out, palm up, the way the stone had first come to him.

The ferryman considered it. Juno hoped he wouldn’t have to tell this stranger why he offered this stone, why it meant to him what a coin might mean to another soul. There was no way to articulate it, not when he hadn’t even decided to bring the stone with him. It had found its way into his pocket, the way it always did when he left his city, travelling from hand to hand to pocket to backpack and back to nervous hands.

The stone was always a token of home.

“This is more than sufficient,” the ferryman said, and it vanished into his massive hand. “I shall do as you wish.”

Juno wondered, fleetingly, if he had given up too much, but there was no time for regret. Instead, he picked his way down the sandy shore to the rowboat, rocking gently in the dark water.

The boat moved swiftly through the brackish water. The ferryman rowed them, and Juno watched his powerful forearms ripple with the effort of travelling across the current. His hands were large and square, as if he was made to do manual labor, the kind of hands that made Juno want to let go of heroics and be saved instead.

“I uh… kind of expected the boat to drive itself,” he said, to fill the silence.

“It is important to work hard.”

“But you’re a God, aren’t you? You can just—” Juno waved his hand vaguely.

“I am not a God. I merely do my duty.”

“Aren’t you immortal?” Juno asked. He knew the stories of the man who watched over the dead and ferried them to the other side of the river Styx. Never had he thought the man might change.

The boat bumped against the shore, the bottom scraping against the inky black stones.

“We have arrived,” the ferryman said briskly.

“Thank you,” Juno said. “Do I…” he trailed off, unsure. He has already paid his fare.

“When you fail in your quest, I will take you home.”

“Oh.” It was all Juno could think to say. Anyone else might have elicited outrage from him, but there was no malice in the ferryman’s voice. He said it with such calm assuredness that Juno nearly gave up on the spot.

“I’d hate to fail now,” he said instead. “It’s been a long fight.”

“I also hope you do not fail, stubborn human.”

Juno nodded, and there was a weight in his chest as he climbed out of the boat and up the path. When he turned to look back, the ferryman was impossibly far away, a smudge of tan against the dark of the water.

The path was easy to find, the slate a pale and silvery grey between mounds of ashen dirt the color of charcoal. It wound between black-barked trees that grew up from the ash, gnarled and twisted, devoid of any leaves or sign of life. Everywhere was lit like twilight, the shadows long, and when Juno looked up, still he saw no stars to brighten the endless shadows.

Slowly, he began to see others among the trees, ghostly figures with no discernible expressions, who did not stop their motions as he passed. Some tilled fields that lay empty, others washed invisible clothes in washbasins that held no water. Two children ran across the path, chasing something Juno could not see. They did not pause their play to look at him.

He saw the palace long before he reached it, and had plenty of time to take in every detail inlaid upon it, complexities revealing themselves like fractals the closer he came. The designs were geometric, triangles

and hexagons repeated again and again in darkly glittering blues and purples.

The doors stood open, the way inside lit dusky purple. Juno climbed the steps of grey marble shot through with white, hand resting on a blaster he knew would do him no good, eyes straining to see another person, a ghost, any movement at all. The palace was as lonely as the passage down, and Juno stepped through the arching doorway into a hall that echoed with every footstep.

“Hello?” Juno called out. His own voice called back, hello? Hello?

There was no other answer.

To his left and right were doors made of iron inlaid with clean, geometric designs of mirrored tin, studded with blood red rubies. Ahead the hall stretched on, empty, unguarded, and open.

Juno walked on.

The double doors at the end of the hall were solid black, so polished that Juno could see his haggard expression glaring back at him. A beard shadowed his cheek, where none had been when he entered the tomb doors. He raised a hand to wipe a smudge of ash from his temple, but before he could, the doors swung open silently.

“Come in and face me, hero,” spoke a resonant voice from the dark.

[image]

THREE

Chapter Summary

Juno meets the God of the Dead, and they make a deal.

Art for this chapter is by Kez! Check them out on tumblr @thekingkez or on twitter @pocketspa

Chapter Notes

This one's M rated folks, because a certain God is extremely horny.

Also some canon-typical discussion of Ben's death/Juno's grieving process in here

The God of Death was known by many monikers: The Lonely God, the Dark Guardian, Lord of the Dead, The Unseen, the Wealthy God, and the God without a Name. It was said that once, he had a name that others called him, but that had been long ago, and no one was brave enough to speak it again.

Juno expected age and gravity and power. He did not expect beauty.

Yet the God without a Name was beautiful and terrible, nearly too perfect to look upon. His skin was pale gold, his cheekbones sharp and his smile sharper. He sat upon a throne of bright white marble, his long dark hair and robes an inky pool against it. He studied Juno with warm curiosity, his eyes liquid gold several shades darker than his skin.

“It is customary to kneel before me,” the God said. His voice was musical, expressive. Juno’s legs shook with the sudden and overwhelming urge to sink to the ground and listen to more soft words, but he resisted.

“I’m not one for customs and traditions ,” he said instead. “I’m here to make a bargain.”

“I thought you might be,” the God said. “Mortals do not come before me unless they have something they need.” Juno watched his lips, full and purple as a bruise, form words, and could barely hear them, so distracted was he by the allure of the lips themselves.

“You’re not really accessible for social calls.” His voice shook as he spoke the glib words.

Something dark flitted across the face of the Lonely God, and his smile dropped. “No,” he said carefully, voice heavy. “The dead are not meant to mingle with the living. And yet here you are.”

Juno had heard that sentiment from everyone he told his quest to. He had a dozen answers, stories of others who had gone into the land of the dead, vicious retorts to assert that he would not be stymied by wisdom or good sense. He had never before considered what it would be like to guard the dead, bound to them and yet not one of them.

The Lord of the Dead shifted on his throne and held out an elegant hand, weighed down by heavy rings set with uncut gems. He was long limbed, his arms slender and graceful and unmarred by the scars that marked Juno. When he moved, a shoulder of his robe slipped, revealing his smooth collar bones and a long expanse of neck.

“You have come such a far way, hero. You must be hungry.”

Juno shook his head. He knew better than to take the food of the dead. As he did, though, his stomach growled, his first sign of hunger since he had entered the tomb.

The Lonely God’s lips quirked up into a smile; he had heard it. Perhaps he had even caused it.

“Come and eat with me?” There was no smugness in his voice, no manipulation that Juno could pick out. Instead, the request seemed almost shy. Juno swallowed, suddenly unsure how to proceed.

“Please, Juno?”

“Hang on, I didn’t tell you my name,” Juno said, to cover the thrill that ran through him at the sound of his name on the God’s lips.

“And I didn’t tell you mine.”

“You don’t have a name,” Juno blurted. “That’s not fair.”

“I have a name,” the Lonely God said. “It is not one that mortals know. Maybe I will tell you, someday. Shall we make a little bargain?”

Juno considered. The Dark Guardian was clearly toying with him, and he should have known better than to play. And yet, speaking to him,

learning his personality could help Juno make his case, even if it also put him at risk of losing whatever game the Lord was playing.

“Tell me the terms, and I’ll consider it,” he said.

The Nameless One smiled, wide and genuine enough that Juno saw the edges of his sharp teeth, and he felt a sudden jolt in his stomach that was not fear.

“When you eat the food I offer you, I will tell you my true and secret name.”

“Pass,” Juno said quickly. “I know what you’re asking, and I won’t do it.” He would not stay in this eternal twilight forever, not for anything.

The God pouted theatrically, and Juno felt a flash of shame, quickly stifled. He was not here to befriend this God, no matter how much he pleaded and cajoled.

“At least sit at my table with me?” He offered. “You may eat your own food.”

“Thanks for the permission,” Juno grumbled.

The God seemed to take that as an acceptance of the invitation, because he slid off his throne, robes pooling around his feet, and strode towards a door at the side of the hall. As he passed Juno, he touched two fingers to the back of Juno’s hand, a delicate gesture that still left Juno feeling as if he had put his hand into an icy river. With great difficulty, his trembling limbs carried him to the Lonely God’s dining room.

The God walked up one side of the table, his hand hovering over the crisp white table cloth. As he walked, food appeared all up the length

of it, hams and turkeys and soup tureens and platters piled high with roasted vegetables in deep jewel tones. Juno's mouth watered at the sight of it, and he bit his lip to distract himself.

His host stopped at the head of the table and sat in a straight back chair that looked carved from granite. He reached out and carefully selected a small crystal bowl of dark pudding studded with pomegranate seeds like little drops of blood. He lifted a silver spoon to his mouth, the tip of his pink tongue visible for just a moment before his lips closed. When he slid the spoon from his mouth, his tongue flicked out again and caught a drop of sugar off his lip.

"Go on, sit," he coaxed.

Juno sat halfway down the table, keeping several seats between them. His place was set with a full set of silverware and a silver plate, a crystal goblet near his right hand. To distract himself from the indecent way the Lonely God licked pudding off his spoon, Juno lifted his fork and speared a purple carrot off one of the platters.

When it moved, it caught the light and glinted faintly. When he brought it closer to examine it, he could see the crystalline structures within it.

"This isn't real," he said flatly.

"You are holding it, aren't you?" His companion said. "It is solid, isn't it?"

"I mean," Juno growled, "It isn't a real carrot."

"Why should it be? You won't eat it, and neither will I."

"So you made a bunch of fake vegetables for what… the aesthetic?"

"A dining room should have food in it."

Juno spun the fork between his fingers, watched the light glint off the many vertices of the carrot. It was beautiful work, or would have been if human hands had carved it. As it was, it had been apparently willed into existence by a God who valued the style of things more than the substance, and so Juno could be little impressed.

"What would have happened if I bit into it?" Juno asked.

"The illusion should have held," He answered. "You would have tasted

it, swallowed it, and received no nutrients from it. But a human should not have seen through the visual illusion either, and you did."

"I don't have time for smoke and mirrors, my Lord."

The God Without a Name reached for an orange. Juno watched carefully as his dexterous fingers separated the peel from the flesh, as the glistening drops of juice caught the light, as the segments separated, the skin bending and stretching. When the God put the piece into his mouth, Juno watched sharp teeth bite down.

"That orange is real," he said decisively.

"Anything I choose to eat is real. I cannot trick myself into tasting the fruits of the living."

Juno may have imagined it, but the God sounded sad at this admittance.

"Do you need to eat?"

"No, but I enjoy it." He smiled again, any trace of moroseness gone from his mercurial face. His sharp teeth pressed against his lower lip. "I enjoy other pleasures of the flesh as well."

"It's a long way to travel for a booty call," Juno pointed out.

"And yet you have travelled it."

Juno laughed, but the God's expression remained open, one manicured eyebrow raised in a question.

Juno sobered. "You're serious."

The God shrugged. "I am offering you a possibility. You intrigue me, Juno Steel. You come all this way on a quest very few would have succeeded at, and you see through my illusions."

"I thought the dead weren't meant to mingle with the living." Juno's heart pounded at the temptation. The God was beautiful and powerful and held his fate in one hand and oh, it would be bliss to surrender to him. His fingers were still separating segments of orange, and Juno found himself unable to look away.

"They are not," the God agreed, "But we all do things we shouldn't." He put the tip of his index finger into his mouth, and licked the juice from it, slowly, tenderly. Juno gasped for air.

The God sat back in his chair and fixed his golden eyes on Juno. “I like to collect beautiful things. And you, Juno Steel, are very beautiful.”

Juno surged to his feet, his chair scraping across the floor. “I can’t stay with you,” he said roughly. “I can’t--I can’t take what you offer me. I didn’t come here out of curiosity, I came because I need something, and that has to come first.”

Please, he thought, please don’t ask again.

“Of course,” he answered, voice calm and soothing. He leaned forward and tidied the orange peels on the table linen into a neat pile. “I would never try to keep you if you didn’t wish it. Please, sit down.”

Juno knew he should flee, knew the fascination that he felt would be a distraction, knew if he was not careful his fascination would get the better of him.

“Juno,” the Dark God said, voice a croon, and the sound of his name settled hot in the bottom of Juno’s stomach. “I want to help you. Please, Hero, tell me why you came and we can reach an agreement.”

It felt, suddenly, a foolish ask. To come before a God, who had watched a hundred thousand heroes rise and fall, who ruled a land so crowded by souls that none would leave a hint of a memory, and ask for one ghost’s freedom.

This God had been alone for centuries, and he toyed with mortals who came before him, called them heroes, conjured up tempting feasts, created a pantomime of hospitality. There was nothing Juno could give this God that he could not create for himself.

At the end of his quest, finally standing before the Lord of the Dead, Juno hesitated.

Already he knew, however this ended, he would not be a wanderer when it was over. There would be no more quests for him. He would always be the one who stood before a God, and that would be all he was.

He would be little more than a fleeting amusement to this man before him who spoke his name with an intimacy deeper than any kiss.

That would have to be enough, because he was not here for himself, he had never journeyed for glory, he was only a husk, a vessel for the

memory of Benzaiten.

So he spoke. “I ask a boon of you, my Lord, God Without a Name. I come to ask you to allow my brother’s soul to return to the land of the living.”

The smile fell from the God’s face. “Sit down,” he asked again, voice grave. “I can not simply give you what you want, but we can discuss it.”

Juno sat.

"Tell me," the Dark Guardian commanded, "Why your brother should be sent back to the world of the living, when so many have passed on."

"He wasn't meant to die," Juno said. "He was nineteen, too young."

"No one is meant to die." The God waved his hand dismissively. "Babes are innocent, they could have eighty years of life in them, and yet they die. They do not get even nineteen years."

"I know," Juno said. "I know that people die all the time, that it's never fair, but they--they don't have someone who would walk into hell for them."

"Your love, you think, is enough to save his soul."

When the Lord of the Dead said that, his expression neutral, his voice flat and gravelly, Juno was reminded again of how foolish he was to ask. He did not let that stop him. "I hope so."

The Lord of Juno's fate spun a knife between his fingers, the silver reflecting back the purple light, and he pressed his lips together. "It is a better reason than most have," he said finally. "Your love... it is a powerful thing." He looked at Juno again. "Tell me about your brother. What was his name?"

And Juno did the only thing he could do, when he stood before a God whose rules, whose power, was incomprehensible to him. He cracked open his chest and poured his love, his longing out into words that tripped over each other in their haste to be free, words that rose and fell as Juno remembered the shape of Benzaiten's smile and the terrible glassiness of his gaze after their mother had destroyed him.

He told the man before him about the time they were four, and he had

played the hero to Benzaiten's dragon, and how Ben had roared surrender so that Juno, for one fleeting second, could feel capable. How even at four, Ben had understood the shape of Juno's fears and carefully bent himself around them. He told about how Benzaiten, eight, had devoted every afternoon to cleaning Old Man Io's shop, then brought home half of the candy payment to share with Juno. Ben, who wrote poetry and music that could woo any person in Hyperion. Ben, who had the galaxy's best smile. Ben, who danced like there was hope in the world and made every person he taught feel like they were beautiful. Ben, who looked at Sarah Steel's hate and saw the pain that lay at the foundation of it. Ben, who saw something good in everyone who crossed his path, and helped them see it too. Ben, who was creative and beautiful and full of life and deserved so much more than what he got.

The Dark God watched him intently, eyes bright, lips slightly parted, and Juno knew he was listening.

"He was the better half of me," Juno said. "It should have been me, who died. He would have been better, brighter--and Mom knew it. She meant to kill me."

He clamped his jaw shut. He had not meant to say that last part, had never admitted that truth out loud. There was no need to say it to this God in front of him. He argued only for Ben.

"He must have been remarkable," the God said softly. "And you loved him very much."

"He was... everything."

"Would you now give your life for him?"

"Yes," Juno said instantly. That trade had haunted him for twenty years, a mantra of grief and guilt.

"How would he feel, knowing that the brother he loved had given so much for him?"

Juno opened his mouth to brush off the question, then hesitated. The question curled in his belly like a knife. "This isn't a therapy session," he snapped.

"It is an important question," the God said. "If you go to seek his spirit, you may not come out. Even if you would pay that cost, would he?"

"It's my life," Juno said. "I'll sacrifice it if I want to." And he did want to, so much it felt like a salvation being offered, a last act of heroism before the pain stopped at last.

"It has been many years he has been in my care," the God said. "Longer now than he was in yours. Even if you were to find him, he will be much changed."

"Time passes," Juno said. "I have changed too."

He shook his head. "You have grown. You have become more of what you once were, gained knowledge and experience and scars. Benzaiten has been in stasis. He may be less than what you remember."

"No," Juno insisted. "I will bring him back to the surface with me. He will see the sun and smell the air and he will remember. He will know how to be Benzaiten again."

The Lord of the Dead nodded sadly. "If he is not what you expected, do not say I didn't warn you."

"You'll let me take him home with me?" Juno exhaled, unsteady. It did not feel real, or even correct. Two decades of searching still could not have prepared him for this.

"You have swayed me," the God said. "You weave a beautiful tapestry with your words, Juno Steel, and it is hard to say no to a love so true. He was very lucky to have one such as you in his life. But there are conditions I must place upon you. I cannot simply release my souls, and I cannot find him if he does not wish to be found."

"Tell me," Juno said. "Whatever the cost is, I will pay it."

The God studied him, eyes roving over Juno's body and settling on his mouth. He was silent for a long time, and Juno watched him back, looking for some hint of what would come next.

“First,” he said, “You must give me something in return, if you are to take a soul from me.”

Juno nodded.

“I want a little token of love from you, Juno Steel, because you glow with it.” He tapped his lip with his index finger. “A kiss, if you are amenable.”

Juno was more than amenable, some part of him deeply grateful for a justification of the kiss he craved, a way to touch the lips that smiled and teased and beckoned. He wanted to kiss a God. He wanted to kiss this God.

"Done," he agreed.

"Good. Thank you, Living One. Now, as for your brother's soul... I can tell you where to find him, but I cannot make him leave. You must travel to him, and you must speak to him. If you can convince him to follow you all the way out of my realm, he is yours. He will return to living flesh, whole and undamaged."

"Will he appear beside me?" Juno asked, who had heard of too many bargains with Gods to trust this one not to punish him on a technicality.

"Yes," The Lonely God said. "He will be beside you, not in his coffin, not in the house where he died. He will be as he was, the moment before his death."

Nineteen years old, as he had been the last time Juno looked at him.

It was all he could have hoped for.

"Thank you," Juno said, mouth dry.

The Lonely God nodded, and he reached out a hand to beckon Juno forward. Juno stepped up to the God's chair, and the God spread his legs, rested his hands on Juno's hips, and tugged him forward so he was held tight between his thighs.

"Come here, my dear," the God breathed softly, one hand cold and heavy on Juno's hip, the other coming up to cup his cheek. Juno felt hot and cold all over, his skin running with electricity. He had kissed many hundreds of people in his travels, seduced and been seduced, but he felt young again, watching this man's purple lips part, beckoning.

Juno lifted a hand and placed it on the back of the Lonely God's neck, his thumb sliding along the line of his jawbone. It was as smooth and cold as the rest of him, sharp under thin white skin.

His kiss was hesitant, gently meeting lip to lip, but his companion opened up, a smile tangible in the curve under Juno's mouth, and Juno was drawn in entirely. Their lips slid together, they sighed and

parted, came back together more hungrily. Their breath met, cold and tingling, and Juno's lungs burned. Their mouths opened deeper, his tongue caught on sharp teeth, his hand fisted in the God's hair. The God's hand ran down over the curve of his ass and pulled them closer together so their hips met, and Juno hooked his arm over the God's shoulder to keep them close.

He teased the God's lip with his teeth and got an answering moan in return. The God's hands roamed hungrily, over his face, his arms, his back, fluttering, never settling. Juno was entirely caught up in the kiss; it may have lasted days, but all he knew was that his God tasted like oranges and pomegranate and he whimpered like Juno's mouth was a healing salve.

Juno shoved a hand between them, slid his palm down the taut space between his God's hip bones to discover his cock, half hard. Juno's veins burned with need, his groan a hollow and distant sound, so preoccupied were his ears with the gasps of his God.

His touch seemed to be permission, because his God began to fumble at the clasps of Juno's clothing, his teeth tracing a path down Juno's jawline to the soft flesh of his throat.

Juno stepped back, gasping for air, wishing his sense memory didn't beg for him to step back into his embrace and surrender. His God kept a hold of his hand, fingers gently pressing into Juno's skin. Juno could spend a lifetime kissing this God, until every soul in the underworld faded away for good.

That was why he had to stop.

"Come back," the Lonely God begged, voice rough with desire, and in that moment he sounded entirely human. There was no trickery on his face, only an obvious hurt, his lips parted, his eyes dark.

"One kiss," Juno said. "That was our deal."

"Stay with me a little longer," the God bargained. "There's no harm in another one."

Did he want the kiss as much as Juno did? Or did he know what the kiss had done to Juno, how it turned his insides to jelly and heated his blood and left him sure that if he let him, this God would be the best lover he ever had. Such an easy and capricious manipulation, to distract a human with their desires of the flesh while work had to be done.

“I can give you anything you want. I have gold, and gems, and dominion over a whole realm. Anything you want shall be yours.”

Juno shook his head. “I don’t want that.”

"Let me take care of you," the God continued. "Stay with me, and let me heal you. You are lonely, and I can fix that."

"No," Juno choked out. "Don't do this to me. We had a deal."

"Juno," the God said, voice cracking. "Juno, I do not lie. Surely the legends tell that. I am a fair God. I honor my deals."

"The legends say you'll do anything to keep a soul in your domain. Now tell me, where is my brother?"

They stared at each other for a moment longer, eyes locked together, and then the Dark Guardian bowed his head. "As you wish, my dear." He wiped his thumb over his lower lip and straightened his robes carefully before he stood. "Come with me, and I will show you your route."

Juno followed him from the room, past the long table and back to the throne room. Sometime during their embrace, all the beautiful, empty food had faded from the table.

FOUR

Chapter Summary

Juno seeks, and finds, Benzaiten

Chapter Notes

This one's a little rough, folks. There's nothing explicit, but it does talk about Sarah, and what she did, and how Ben and Juno are coping with it. A lot of frank discussions of death.

It's sad. I made myself sad rereading it.

A castle balcony overlooked the empty lands that surrounded it, and an empty wind whistled across Juno's ears and stirred the Lord of the Dead's robes. He rested a hand on the obsidian balcony and lifted a hand to point across the rocky field.

"Your brother is somewhere farther down by the river, across the Elysian Fields," he said. "You will have to travel through the lands of people who are working off their guilt, and then through the burned forest. Be careful there; the people who occupy it are rarely in a position to speak to anyone, and they may react strangely."

"How strangely?"

"They died violently," the Lord of the Dead told him. "They are still processing their death, deciding if they trust people, making peace with it. Do not speak to them, it will only confuse them."

"What happens if they do make peace with it?" Juno asked.

"They can go, if they like. Many stay, to help others along."

"Go?"

The God shrugged. "They fade away, to rejoin the mist. I do not keep anyone here forever."

Juno felt cold. "How do you know Benzaiten hasn't gone… on."

"I know," he replied with surety. "He's been waiting for you."

"Oh," Juno said, voice small.

“Once you get through the fields, follow the river upstream. You will find him.”

Juno tried to speak, but his throat was thick with tears, with anticipation, with guilt. Had Ben been kept here, alone, because of him? Was he hurting, unable to process what had happened to him?

“I will not stop you, whatever you decide to do,” the God without a Name told Juno, pulling him from his thoughts. “We have made a deal, and I will not break my promises. But Benzaiten makes his own choices.”

Juno nodded.

“By extension, I will respect what he chooses.”

Juno nodded again, searched for something to say. The God reached out and pressed gentle, icy fingers to the back of Juno’s hand.

“Juno, if, at the end of this, you find yourself with nowhere to go, please consider returning to me?”

“I have a home,” Juno said. “Benzaiten has a home.”

“I know,” the Lonely God said. “I know. I offer all the same.”

Juno left the palace the way he had come, down the path that cut between the fields of shattered, jagged rocks. Instead of returning to the ghostly forest, he turned and followed the path that led around the edge of the forest and gently sloped towards a field of wheat that stretched farther than Juno’s eye could see in the dim light.

The path turned to packed grey dirt, and as Juno walked it, he parted stalks of wheat that leaned over the path, heads heavy with ripened grain.

People were dotted across the field, back bent, heads bowed. Each of them worked alone. When Juno passed close to people, they stopped their tilling in the field and looked at him sideways, as if they were frightened of him.

They had forgotten what a living person looked like, what they burned with, and Juno burned too bright for them to look directly at him.

Down, down the land sloped, until it dropped off into a steep river

bank, the land vanishing under Juno's tired feet. He barely caught himself on a tree before he went skidding down the scree of rocks.

The sides of the bank indicated that it had once been a wide and deep river, but now it was a narrow trickle, winding along a sandy bed. Juno picked his way down, stumbling and sliding. Little lumps of grey grass and tree root poked out of the nearly vertical earth, providing handles for him.

When he reached the bottom, he looked downstream to see a stairway built into the bank only a few minutes walk away.

Biting down a curse, he turned the other way. Up in the distance, fading into the mist, there was a little house. It was built of grey stone, but the roof was bright green tile, and Juno felt a pang. He had not been in the underworld long, but already he missed growing things. He hurried forward, stumbling in his haste, dizzy with anticipation.

As he drew closer, he picked out the shape of a man sitting on the porch, watching the trickle of the stream pass by. He was just as Juno remembered him, his high cheekbones catching the light, his long dreadlocks twisted through with brightly colored threads.

His clothes were different, darker and more somber, a long sleeved tunic of dark grey and close fitting black pants.

Funerary clothes.

Juno stopped, the air knocked out of him. Was this what Ben had been buried in? He couldn't even remember. It hadn't mattered, when the weapon that took his life had also necessitated a closed casket.

Ben turned and met Juno's eye, but he didn't smile. He stood slowly, braced himself against the porch railing, and stared. Juno stepped closer.

"Hey, Super Steel," Ben said.

If Juno had been asked what Ben's voice sounded like, he wouldn't have been able to remember it, but now, his voice washed over him like a tidal wave, exactly like it always had been. Juno tried to speak past the lump in his throat.

"Hello, Benzaiten."

Ben bounded off the porch and met Juno where he was, fingers reaching out to touch his face.

“I hoped I would be waiting for you longer,” he said. His fingers traced over the edge of Juno’s eye patch, then touched the scar on the bridge of his nose. He jerked back like Juno’s skin had burned him.

“No,” he said. “What were you thinking?”

“I’m here to bring you home,” Juno said.

“You’re alive!” Ben yelled, and shook his hand out. “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Of course I should be here,” Juno argued. “I talked to the Lonely God, and he said you can leave.”

Ben stared, open horror on his face. “What’s the cost?” He asked. “What did you have to bargain away? Juno, no—I’ll go talk to him. I’ll tell him the deal is off.”

“I already filled my half of the deal!” Juno said quickly. “I knew what I was doing!”

“That old miser counts his souls like he counts his money,” Ben said bitterly. “He’ll never let me leave, and now he has you too.”

“No,” Juno said. “No, all he asked for was a kiss. And I gave it to him.”

“A kiss,” Ben sneered. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t make this up.”

Ben shook his head, but he looked more confused than angry. “That can’t be it. There’s a hidden cost. No one trades a life for a kiss.”

Juno shrugged. “I think he has a soft spot for me.”

“I’ll say.” Ben’s face softened into a sly smile. “Well, Casanova, what’s it like to kiss the God of Death?”

Juno’s face heated at the memory of strong hands, lips like silk. “A lady doesn’t kiss and tell,” he said, but his voice wavered.

Ben hooted with laughter. “Unbelievable.” He stepped back and flung himself down to the porch step, still laughing. “I shouldn’t be

surprised, you could make a stone blush if you put your mind to it."

"You're one to talk, Mr. Galaxy's Best Smile."

Ben flashed a familiar cheeky grin at Juno and patted the seat next to him. Juno took it, grateful to rest after his hike.

"You've gotten old," Ben said.

Juno fought the stone in his chest at the reminder that Ben hadn't had that privilege.

"I walk all the way into hell for you," he grumbled, "and you call me an idiot and insult my looks."

"I didn't say it was bad," Ben said cheerily. "I just said you were old. I like the scars. They make you look like a hero."

It took Juno two tries to get the words out. "That should have been you."

"Nah," Ben said carelessly. "You were always the one planning to fight dragons. I just wanted to dance."

"You helped people," Juno insisted.

"Oh, maybe," Ben said, then, "I'm helping people now."

"How?"

Ben gestured at the stream, trickling by at their feet. "People come here, looking for whatever they left unfinished. They follow the river, because they don't know what else to follow. Usually they just need someone to listen to them, maybe show them that they did good. Then they move on."

"Why are you still here then?" Juno asked.

Ben looked at him sideways, frowning. "I was waiting for you, idiot."

"Oh." Even Juno couldn't argue that Ben should have moved on. Twins were one heart in two bodies. Ben understood what it had been like for him, because it had been the same for Ben. He didn't even need to ask.

"It's been nice," Ben said. "It's peaceful down here. My house is small, but it's cozy. I take naps. I teach the kids to dance."

“Everyone in the fields was working,” Juno said.

“No one makes them,” Ben said. “Or, no one makes me. We don’t eat.”

“Huh.”

“What have you been doing?” Ben asked. “Besides getting beat up a lot.”

Juno laughed. It was a shorter, hoarser laugh than Ben’s, filled with twenty years of regrets. “Mostly that. Saved a few innocent villagers, went on a quest or two. Lost some body parts along the way.” He gestured vaguely at his eyepatch. He didn’t say, Looking for you.

“Kissing Gods,” Ben said.

“Just the one.”

“Still.”

“Still.” Juno agreed. It was more than most people got. He had lived more life than most people, who were born in their fields and died in them and worked them even after death.

Maybe they liked to work, the same way Juno did, and the idea of quitting left them empty inside.

What would he do, when he had Ben back? He wouldn’t need to quest anymore. He could take a break.

“You want to go?” He asked Ben.

“Back to the surface, you mean?”

“Where else?” Juno said, but for a moment he wondered, what if he went back to the lonely God, and warmed both their hearts for a little while. They had time.

He leaned in to Ben, and bumped their shoulders together.

“You don’t want to see my house first?” Ben asked, but then he shook his head. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“You won’t be stuck here anymore,” Juno assured him. “You can forget it.”

Ben frowned, lips parted, but he rose to his feet instead of speaking.

He still moved like a dancer, fluid and athletic.

Juno stood with creaking knees and a kind of heart-weariness that had made him old even at nineteen.

They walked along the stream, towards the stairs built into the bank. Ben rambled as they went, pointing out the striations in the dirt, the veins of obsidian visible in the piles of rock.

“There’s a vein of emerald a little farther up,” Ben said. “It’s beautiful, even in the dim light.”

Juno glanced at the ceiling, lost in fog.

“Don’t you miss the sunlight?” He asked.

Ben shrugged. “You adjust.” He began to climb the stairs.

Juno followed, noticing as he did how fast Ben moved, without his breathing ever changing its slow rhythm.

Ben stood at the top of the bank, eyes distant as he looked out at the stream.

“Kind of ironic,” Juno said mildly. “You have all these gems around, and nothing to spend them on.”

“It’s nice,” Ben said. “I don’t have to beg for food anymore.”

Ben had never complained, had always cheerfully found a way to comfort Juno through weeks of the same dry food. It hurt more, somehow, to hear Ben acknowledge it so bluntly.

“I don’t have to beg either,” he said. “I made it out.”

“I’m really glad,” Ben said. “I worried about you.”

Juno struggled for a response. He wanted to laugh it off, to call Ben a mother hen. If it had been anyone else, he would have. “It took me a while,” he said instead. “To be okay, I mean.”

“And mom?”

“Dead.”

“How long?”

“She went right after you,” Juno said. “Coroner said it was an accident, but that’s what he said about you, too.”

Ben made a small noise of acknowledgement. “I thought... I would know when she died. Most people come through here.”

“Coward,” Juno said derisively. “She couldn’t even face you.”

“It’s fine,” Ben said.

“How can you say that?” Juno snarled. “After what she did to you?”

“I’m not saying I forgive her,” Ben said. “Or that what she did was justified. I just... I didn’t need that closure. I know what happened. I looked her in the eye and—“ Ben stopped walking.

Juno had stopped walking too, his whole chest tight with anger, with grief, with all the emotions he thought had faded.

“Bezaiten—“ he said, and his voice broke. He pulled his brother into a hug and pressed his face to his shoulder, held him in his arms. He wasn’t cold like the Lonely God was cold, but neither did he feel alive. His skin was the temperature of the air around them, as if he was only a doll.

Ben returned the hug, fingers tight in Juno’s shirt, and he exhaled.

“I’m sorry,” Ben said. “We forget, down here, that up there people don’t like to talk about death.”

“No,” Juno clarified, “I’m just so sorry, and mad at mom, and I thought, eventually, it would hurt a little less, but it never stopped.”

“And here you are.”

“I’m here,” Juno said. “I’m here.”

Ben held Juno a little longer, his voice muffled against Juno’s cheek. “I hoped,” he said, slowly, like he was pushing words out past a barbed wire fence, “that once she destroyed me entirely, she would stop killing us both by inches.”

It wasn’t true, of course. She had been killing Juno by inches even in her grave. “No,” he said, softly, “I would have taken half the death, happily.”

“I know,” Ben said. “But you left.”

“I’m sorry,” Juno breathed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“No.” Ben said firmly. “You did what was brave, and strong, and you walked away. It’s not your fault that I didn’t follow.”

“I thought I was the coward, running away.”

“I thought I was the coward, keeping things the same.”

Juno laughed through the tears and pulled back to see that Ben was crying too, silvery ghost tears that shone in the twilight.

They walked on, quieter now, occupied with their own thoughts. Slowly, trees filled the landscape, closing in around them.

“Juno,” Ben said softly.

“Yeah?”

“When I go up with you, will I be nineteen again?”

“You’re still nineteen.”

Ben exhaled slowly. “Not really.”

Juno didn’t know which answer Ben wanted, and he was honest. “Yes. You’ll be just as you were, right before.”

“And you’ll be forty.”

“Thirty-nine,” Juno corrected.

“An adult.”

Juno could have argued that nineteen was adulthood, but he knew what Ben meant. “Yeah,” he said. “You’ll get your whole life ahead of you.”

“You were already insufferable about being older than me,” Ben said, a little ironically.

“I promise not to tease you too much.”

“That’s magnanimous of you.”

They lapsed back into silence. Ben kept an even pace, eyes fixed on the horizon. Juno had to focus on the uneven path as it grew steeper,

and his breathing grew labored.

They passed into the dark wood, the trees blackened and barren, and one soul, too charred to reveal features, reached out and took Juno's hand.

"Hero," the voice rasped. "You are not meant to be here."

"Hey," Ben said. "It's okay."

Juno tried to pull his arm away. The ashen fingers held together, their grip on his hand rough.

"You will... go to the surface again?"

"Let go," Juno snapped.

"No, I need... I need vengeance. Take me back to the surface with you, mortal."

"I can't," Juno said sharply. There would be no vengeance for this misshapen soul, held together by anger, but Juno wished he could give it to them, end their eternal worry, dissipate them. He had bargained for only one soul in his journey.

The Lonely God had warned him about this section of the path, warned him not to be distracted by every person in this wood who needed to finish their earthly business.

"What's your name?" Ben asked.

The spirit tilted their head, looked at Ben for the first time. They let go of Juno and stumbled towards his brother. "I am from the Cerberus province," they answered. "I was a debtor, until I could no longer work. Then I was terminated."

"I'm sorry," Ben said.

"The men who owned me will come down here someday," the spirit hissed, "and I will feast. Kill them for me, hero. Kill them quickly, for I am hungry."

Juno did not have this spirit's name, or the name of the criminal he was meant to be killing, but he also knew it did not matter. He could not do as this spirit asked, and he should not have stopped to speak to them at all.

“We’re not here for you,” Juno said.

“Then I will follow you out.”

“You can’t,” Ben said. “You belong down here.”

“And you? God-touched one, you think you are the only one who can leave? He is bright enough to be a beacon for us all.”

Juno looked to Ben for explanations of any part of the spirit’s statements. Ben bit his lip, a nervous gesture that was achingly familiar, and then he slowly approached the spirit.

“You can’t leave,” Ben said. “It’s too late for you, and there’s nothing for you to go back to. You don’t want to go back there anyway. It’s better to move forward.”

“I won’t,” The spirit snarled.

“If you go back, it won’t make you feel better,” Ben said. “You can’t undo what’s been done. You already lost the life you had up above. But now that you’re down here, you have as long as you need to make peace with that, and to decide what you want next.”

“I don’t want anything,” the spirit said. “He took it all from me.”

Ben looked at the trees around them. “It must be hard for you, to find something to look forward to. This forest is so dark.”

The spirit’s stance softened, their shoulders dropped, their hands clasped before them. “It’s lonely,” they said, in a small, soft voice.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Ben said. “You can keep moving.”

“If I leave, I won’t meet him when he comes.”

“No,” Ben acknowledged. “But you won’t be stuck here, hurting, either.”

“There’s nowhere else to go.”

“Sure there is,” Ben said. “Follow the path down to the river, then follow the river. When you get to the delta, you’ll know what to do.”

“Will there be friends?”

Ben nodded. “Everyone heads down the river eventually. I promise

you'll find someone to travel with."

The spirit turned their charred head to look down the path Ben was indicating, and then they slowly took a step forward. Ben let them go, silently watching as they stumbled along, gaining confidence and speed.

When they were fading into the distance, Juno said softly, "What's at the end of the river?"

"I don't know," Ben said. "It's where people go when they're ready to move on." Juno thought he heard longing in Ben's voice.

"What did they mean, when they called you God-touched?"

Ben laughed. "You think you're the only special one in the family?"

"What?"

"We aren't all mortal," Ben said. "Both of us are living on borrowed time, because of a God's whim."

Juno remembered, all the times Sarah had said they were an answer to her prayers. He hadn't thought she meant it literally.

"I'm only human," he insisted. "Cut me, and I bleed red blood."

Ben traced agile fingers along his own cheekbone, out to his temple and down to his jaw. "Most people come down here with scarred souls," he said, voice now filled with a nameless grief that Juno knew too well. "Like that spirit, all burned up, marked where they died. Our souls are a little more resistant, half star-stuff. I thought you knew."

"No," Juno said numbly. "No, I thought it was all Mom's ego."

"Not everyone could come down to the underworld and survive, Super Steel."

Juno wanted to argue, but it didn't seem like it would get him anywhere. Instead he asked, "how long have you known?"

"Since I died," Ben said. "Things look different, down here."

"You're telling me," Juno said, the enormity sinking in, "That we are half God?"

"Not exactly. Not like we have a God as a physical father. There's just

a little bit of…" Ben waved his hand vaguely, "in us."

Juno nodded. When he couldn't think of anything else to say, he turned and walked up the path. Ben stayed at his elbow.

The path sloped gently up, the castle visible in the distance, a smudge of inky mirrored black amid the grey.

It looked lonely, a fortress even the dead didn't enter, and Juno had a pang of sympathy for the God who had no one to wait for.

"You're very good at guiding people," Juno said. "I didn't know what to say to that spirit."

"This isn't your realm," Ben said. "It's mine."

Juno had nothing worth saying to that. He reached out and took his brother's hand, and they walked the rest of the way in silence, into the thick fog, right to the edge of the wide, deep river that separated the dead from the living.

Juno stopped, and tried to commit the soft, cold, feeling of Ben's spirit hand to memory.

"You aren't coming back with me, are you?" he asked.

"I can't," Ben said. "I've made my home here. I can't move backwards."

"Then I'll stay with you," Juno said.

"No, Juno--"

"You said I'm half star stuff, that I'm tougher than other humans. I can stay."

"I don't want you to," Ben said.

Juno felt as if his chest was collapsing. "There's no me without you."

"Yes, there is. There has been, for twenty years. I know you've been looking for me, and I love you for it, and I miss you every second, but Juno, I need you to live. I need you to live for you, so when you do come down here for good, you don't have regrets."

Juno laughed harshly. "I have nothing but regrets."

Ben stepped into Juno's space and pulled him into a hug. Juno wanted to shove him away in anger, wanted to scream that his life was for nothing if he couldn't have Ben back, but Ben held him firm.

"Do something for yourself," Ben urged. "Don't you have someone waiting for you?"

There was no one, really, waiting for Juno. Friends and old lovers, but he had devoted his life to finding Ben again, and left himself little time for true connection.

There was one person as alone as he was, who had begged for his companionship, who stood between two worlds. Someone who, maybe, would understand the bone deep grief he felt.

Juno squeezed Ben a little tighter, and then he let go.

FIVE

Chapter Summary

Juno finds a new purpose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno entered the castle alone, the echoes of his single set of footsteps now a cruel reminder of his loss. Down the long and lonely hallway he went, and each step brought him closer to collapse.

In the throne room, the Lord of the Dead was waiting for him. He rose from the throne and stepped forward hesitantly, a hand extended in a weak gesture of comfort. His face, still so beautiful, now held a terrible grief that felt more real to Juno than any fetching smile.

“Did you know?” Juno asked, and his voice shook and cracked. “Did you send me on a fool’s mission on purpose?”

“It was not foolish,” the God said. “I suspected, yes, that he would refuse your offer. I know the dead well. But if he had walked out, I would have let him. I would have done that for you.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I tried,” the Lonely God said. “But this way, you got to see him, speak to him, say goodbye. Most do not even get that.”

“So I should be grateful?” Juno cried out. “Grateful that he’s gone, and I’m alone again?”

“No. I only say to cherish what you have, even if it is not enough. Especially if it is not enough.”

Juno raised his hands, palms up, a pleading gesture. “Who am I? Who am I if I’m not his brother?” His voice broke.

“Juno Steel,” the God Without a Name said, and when he said it, it sounded like a title, like a gift, like a purpose.

“Is that enough?”

“It is,” Juno’s God assured him. “It is enough for me, enough for

everyone you have met on your journey. Can you let it be enough for you?”

“I don’t know,” Juno said, his voice soft. “But I want to stay here and try. If--if the offer still stands.”

“I do not make promises I won’t keep,” he said, and his voice was soft too, quaking with emotion. “I know this is not how you expected your journey to end, but I would be honored to have you with me, for however long you choose to stay.”

Juno looked at the man before him, too beautiful to comprehend, his eyes bright with hope and longing. This man looked at him and saw him for who he was, and understood him, and this man too knew what it was like to be among a crowd but not of it.

Juno remembered a kiss, bordering on desperate, a kiss that for a moment, had swept away everything except the press of skin on skin, the sharing of a breath.

Juno saw a lonely man, one who was curious and vulnerable and wise, who cared faithfully for his kingdom of souls, even when they could never give love back to him. Juno wanted to know every inch of him, his clever fingers and clever tongue and clever mind, his heart and soul and the secrets of his breath.

This man wanted nothing from Juno, needed nothing but his companionship. He held Juno’s battered spirit, his half a heart, and wanted him anyway, saw him as a whole person, not a symbol or a weary wanderer.

Their eyes met, and the God of the Dead opened his arms to Juno, and Juno stepped into his embrace.

Chapter End Notes

> This is technically the end of the story, but there's an epilogue coming right up

SIX

Chapter Summary

> This chapter is a little (a lot) spicy. The last section is where the actual sex happens, if that's not your jam
>
> The absolutely INCREDIBLE art for this chapter is by Dayngel. Go find her on tumblr at d4yngel.tumblr.com and shower her with praise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The seasons did not change in the underworld, but Juno hardly missed them. The seasons of Mars were windy and windier, and the underground was still and dark and, as Juno grew to understand, safe. He was enveloped by the darkness, aware even when he walked the land that traces of his Lord infused the landscape. When he woke alone, he could remember the aching isolation of the desert, the endless journeys between cities, but always his Lord returned to him before Juno's darkness could creep in.

They tangled together in their expansive bed, miles of black satin and golden skin, Juno's warm dark skin the perfect complement between them. There were no days to measure, but every time Juno slept, his God woke him with kisses across his face and down his body. The Lonely God never seemed to tire of Juno's body, tracing spidery fingers across his scars, pressing hungry mouth to lips and chest and belly, burying himself between Juno's thick and living thighs. Juno was worshipped and in return, he breathed out pleading prayers for release.

Juno's God sucked him dry and fucked him hoarse, then kissed profanities from his lips and drew him to his marble chest.

"There's something on your mind," he murmured one morning.

"Besides you?"

The God chuckled, low and indulgent. "Yes, my sweet. I can tell when you aren't entirely absorbed by me." Even while he urged Juno to share his worries, his fingers traced along the contours of Juno's

muscles.

“I should go back,” Juno said. “There are people on the surface who should know I’m alive.”

“So you have said. And yet you stay.”

Juno laughed. “You’re very distracting.”

The God hummed and kissed Juno, slow and deep. When he broke the kiss, he stayed so close to Juno that his breath tickled Juno’s cheek as he spoke. “Have I not made you happy, my hero?”

“Yes,” Juno said quickly, then, “I mean, I just… I promised Rita I would go home. I don’t want her to think I’ve died.”

His God sighed and rolled away. Juno propped himself up on an elbow to hungrily drink in the view of him, pale against dark sheets, entirely naked and spread out for Juno’s touch. Juno couldn’t imagine giving him up for anything, but twenty years of wandering left him restless still. Every day his limbs ached to move, but every day he seemed too weak to walk away.

“I knew you would want to move on eventually,” his God said, voice soft. “It would be selfish to keep you forever, no matter how much I might want it.”

“Could I come back?” Juno asked hesitantly.

His God turned to look at him, his golden gaze sharp and piercing. “You would?” He asked, a pleading note in his voice, and Juno realized that for all this immortal being could destroy the world, he was not sure he could be loved.

“Oh,” Juno breathed out, a gasp of pain, and he took his God’s face between his roughened hands and kissed his lips, his cheeks, his brow, and again his lips, mouth open and hungry.

“Oh,” he moaned again, as he rolled to straddle his God, to kiss the hollow of his throat, to worship the bones of his jaw, the jut of his breast bone.

“Yes,” he whispered into the Lonely God’s ear. “Yes, my darling, my lord, you silly man, *yes* I want to come back to you. I don’t want to be away from you for a minute longer than I must.”

His God let out a breath that sounded closer to a sob, and he dug his fingers into Juno's hips and pulled him closer against him.

"Juno," he breathed out. "Juno, _Juno_." For the first time since Juno had met him, he seemed at a loss for words, his fingers moving unsteady across Juno's skin, and when their mouths met, it was like each breathed life into the other.

The Lord of the Dead seemed truly tired, his head on Juno's chest, his eyes nearly closed. Juno ran his fingers through the God's inky black hair, quietly enjoying the cool slickness of it. "I'm worried I won't be able to come back," he said, into the warm silence.

"Who will stop you, my love?"

"It took me twenty years to find an entrance," Juno said. "The legends say they move often. What if it takes me another twenty?"

His God hummed in thought. "I shall give you a token," he said. "Something that belongs here with me. Or..." he trailed off, face gravely serious.

"Or what?"

"I may have a better idea, provided you consent."

"What is it?" Juno asked.

The God moved so he lay on Juno's chest, chin propped up on his forearms so he could look into Juno's eyes. "You are already God-touched," he said slowly. "Not part God, but not entirely mortal. Your body can withstand more than a mortal body. If you ate the fruit of the dead, there would always be a part of you that belonged to me."

Juno's lips quirked up in a smile. "If all it takes is eating food of the dead, I've already swallowed your—"

"Juno!" His God said sharply, but he smiled.

"You should have warned me," Juno teased. "I would have made you finish on my face."

"Be serious," he said, laughter still softening his gaze. "I don't just mean any food, I mean there is a special tree that contains the essence of this land."

Juno hummed in thought and dropped his head back against his pillows. He still felt his lover's weight against his chest, his gentle fingers still for once. He was letting Juno really consider it.

"Is there a cost?" He asked.

"You'll need to come back to me," his God said. "Every once in a while. The dead will be a part of you forever."

"But I'll be able to come and go?"

"Yes," he assured him. "The land will not keep you, provided you do not stay away too long."

"And Ben?"

"What about him?"

"Will I still be able to visit him?"

"Of course. As long as he stays here, you will find him."

The far off possibility of Ben following other souls down the river into the beyond was not one Juno needed to consider, or was ready to. That journey would happen when Ben was ready, and Juno could not —would not—stop him.

"There is another thing to consider," the Lord of the Dead said, voice somber. "The living are not meant to enter my lands. You are God touched, and you have my protections, and you have been fed by me, but you are still a creature of the light. Without the sun, eventually you will fade. By becoming halfway mine, you could stay here for as long as you want."

Juno studied his own hand while he thought. His skin had become grayer while he lingered in his God's bed, and every day he seemed less able to leave it. The God of the Dead's words made Juno think perhaps he was not just growing soft, perhaps he was weakening in this unfamiliar land, with its still air.

"I'll do it," Juno said. It felt like it had always been the only option.

Juno sat on the Lord of the Dead's throne. The was sharply cut stone, but covered in thick fabrics and pillows, so Juno reclined, cushioned by fur and silk.

His God stood between his legs, one hand closed tight as the other traced Juno's lips.

"Are you sure?" He asked, voice low. "Once you eat this fruit, you must alway come home to me."

"You are my home," Juno said, voice sure.

This beautiful creature, robe barely tied shut, delicate collar bones and full dark lips, was Juno's future. And only an afternoon's walk away, Juno's past, his other half, had made a new life. It was all he could have hoped for.

His God cupped his chin in one cool hand, and kissed him so hungrily that Juno gasped for breath, his hands tugging open the robe, his body reaching to bring them closer. His God pressed forward, spread Juno's legs wider, thigh rubbing against his cock.

When he broke the kiss, Juno's mouth followed his for a moment, seeking nothing but more contact.

His God drew back, then opened his hand to reveal three small red seeds, each as perfect and round as a drop of blood. He took one, delicately between two fingers, and pressed it to Juno's waiting tongue. Juno, a smile quirking his lips, ran his tongue along the fingers, swirled his tongue around the fingertips. He took them as far into his mouth as he could, eyes locked with his God's, before he drew away, only the seed left in his mouth.

He bit down, tasted a quick burst of sweet juice, and swallowed. His veins fizzed with the sudden energy, and he gasped, his fingers clenching against his God's shoulders.

He leaned forward for another kiss, and the God put a finger up to stop him. Then he placed one of the remaining seeds on his own tongue with a wicked smile.

Juno pulled him into a kiss, mouth open wide, tongue brushing against his God's, and took the seed into his mouth and swallowed it whole.

He groaned against his God's lips as another bolt of energy surged through him. His hands, pulled his God's body flush against his, every touch more intense than he had ever felt before.

His God rolled his hips, brushed their cocks together, and Juno whimpered.

"Are you ready for more?" His God whispered against his lips.

"Please," Juno moaned.

Instead of feeding Juno the final seed, his God pulled Juno's robes open. He kissed every inch of exposed skin, and Juno was too overwhelmed with sensation to do more than cling to his God.

"I want you inside me," his God purred. "I want every inch of you to feel me, to know what I am."

Juno slid his hands over smooth cold skin, untied his God's belt, pushed his clothes away. The Lord of the Dead pushed himself up, entirely naked and within Juno's grasp, and straddled Juno's lap. He bucked his hips and rubbed their cocks together. It was too much sensation all at once, and lit every inch of Juno's skin with rolling, tingling pleasure. He held on, one hand tangled in his God's hair, the other clinging desperately to one slim hip.

Without any further preparation, the God lowered himself onto Juno's cock with agonizing slowness. Juno kept his eyes fixed on his God's face, as his head tilted back, mouth open, shoulders back. His hands, flat against Juno's chest, flexed, pressing against the soft flesh there.

"Oh Juno," he moaned. "You feel so strong, so powerful. I need you deeper, I need all of you—"

Juno dug his fingers into his God's ass and rolled his hips up until they were as close as they possibly could be. Juno held the moment, savored the intimacy and the tightness and the way his God's lips weakly formed his name, and then his God began to move. He fucked himself on Juno's cock, praises spilling from his lips, and Juno could only hold on as waves of sensation took him.

"Juno, darling, can you feel it?" His God whispered in his ear. "Can you feel my power in you?"

He moaned and tried for words, but none came.

"Tell me, darling. Tell me how it feels."

"Oh," Juno gasped. "Oh, God, *oh*"

"That's it, sweetheart," he crooned. "I can feel it, I can feel how powerful and beautiful and good you are, I can feel what you are becoming, and I get to be the one to see it, and have you inside me, and it—oh—" his rhythm faltered and his hands shifted, braced against Juno's shoulders, knees tight around Juno's thighs. He tightened around Juno as he came, thighs shaking against Juno's, Juno's name on his lips.

Juno could not form words, could not say what his God meant to him, could only watch the rapture on his face with a desperate sort of awe. He opened his eyes and found Juno's gaze, and something must have shown on Juno's face, because then they were kissing, hungry and close, as if it was all either of them needed to survive. Juno's whole body was on fire, riding the edge of orgasm, but he had learned denial from months of making love to a being with no refractory period, so he pressed one hand down on his God's thigh, keeping him still, and with the other hand coaxed him back to hard, their mouths never parting.

He moaned Juno's name, then kept kissing him, riding him, as Juno stroked his cock. He could feel how close his God was already from the way he trembled, the way his rhythm varied.

“Will you finish inside me?” He asked, lips caressing Juno’s cheekbone, his jaw. “I want to feel your life, your power.”

“It’s yours,” Juno said, barely aware of the words he was forming. “It’s yours. I’m yours.”

They came together, Juno shaking so hard he lost his grip, and it was only his God’s thighs tight against his that kept them both on the throne.

Juno became aware of his body again slowly, as his God kissed each part back into feeling, down his cheek, across his shoulders, down his chest. When he reached the top of Juno’s ribcage, he slid off Juno’s cock slowly, with an undignified whimper. He moved off the throne, still kissing across Juno’s belly and hips, until he knelt between Juno’s legs. He looked up at Juno through heavy lashes, a smile crinkling the edges of his eyes, and moved his kisses up the inside of Juno’s thighs.

Already Juno was half hard again, God-food still pumping through his veins as his lover took him in his mouth.

Juno watched his dark head move, mouth sliding along the length of Juno’s cock, and Juno tangled one hand in his hair. He heard the now familiar gasp of pleasure, and watched his God tremble as Juno pulled a little tighter, guiding his head.

The Lord of the Dead’s hair was not black, as Juno had first seen, but dusky violet shot through with white gold, like stars in a twilight sky. Tiny golden freckles sprinkled his shoulders, visible now to Juno’s more sensitive eyes.

Juno pulled his God’s head back so he looked up, their eyes locked on each other. His eyes were not just gold, but striated with the same white gold that decorated his hair, his lips were full and swollen with Juno’s kisses, and Juno knew, no matter how long he looked, no matter how powerful his eyes became, that he would never tire of looking at the man between his legs.

He took the final seed from the arm of the throne, and put it into his mouth. It tasted stronger, sweeter, heavy on his tongue, and then he swallowed it down and threw his head back as he shook with revelation.

“Juno,” his God cried, and he pushed himself up to stand over Juno, to caress him and kiss him and anchor him as Juno became a part of his God’s land.

It felt like a death. It felt like an orgasm, but it went on and on, knowledge and power and love rushing through his veins.

Juno choked out a moaning sob, his hands searching blindly for his God, and pulled his warming flesh towards him. His God pulled him to his chest, caressed his hair and murmured his name over and over.

The tide abated, enough for Juno to listen to the soothing litany of praise his God murmured, to feel the marble throne beneath him and silky skin under his fingers. He pulled away, searching for words.

Their eyes met again, and Juno inhaled sharply at the awe in his God's eyes.

"Oh Juno," he whispered reverently. "Juno, *Juno.*"

Juno watched his face, his trembling lips, and then he knew, "Peter."

Peter let out a little cry, and he kissed Juno, teeth and tongue and desperate hunger, as if they had not just fucked themselves out, as if they had not touched for years, as if Juno was all he had ever wanted, and Juno, electrified and powerful and more alive than he had ever been, kissed back, his hands running over every inch of his Lord's body.

"Say it again?" His God begged, and kissed a constellation across Juno's cheeks.

And Juno whispered the voice of his salvation into the still darkness, over and over, "Peter, Peter, Peter."

Peter answered him, "My queen, my Goddess, my life."

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap!

Thank you SO much to Mloking, Kez, and Dayngel for their mind blowing art. Their work has been so inspiring to me.

Thank you to Karin, Jay, and Sarah for moderating the Bang and organizing it in the face of world collapse.

Thank you to all of you for reading it :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!